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AUTHOR Michael, Steve Olu
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ABSTRACT

In an era of rising public criticism of education and decreasing resources, strategic planning can be a major tool for educational administrators who wish to respond to the increasing challenges their adult literacy programs face. Strategic planning can be defined as a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does, and why it does it. The strategic planning process includes designing, implementing, and monitoring plans for improving organizational or program decision making. Although various writers specify different numbers of steps in a strategic planning model, they generally agree on the following core activities that must be addressed: (1) reaching initial agreement among all the planning committee members; (2) defining the program or organizational mandate and mission; (3) formulating program objectives; (4) conducting SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis; (5) developing strategies and an action plan; (6) implementing the plan; and (7) monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of the implementation Each of these activities has its own subprocess or substeps that nee to be followed carefully. Strategic planning helps literacy program administrators to develop a clear vision of what their programs are about, who they serve, and in what ways. It also helps link this vision with the activities that will implement it. Strategic planning also helps administrators collaborate and communicate with relevant agencies, develop realistic goals, and develop an implementation strategy. Strrtegic planning is an extensive process that ensures program survival and growth in a rapidly changing environment.
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ADMINISTERING ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS: THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING

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by Steve Olu Michael

Introduction

Planning is not new to educational administrators; it's certainly not new to adult literacy program directors. The task of developing curriculum, hiring staff, recruiting students, and turning out graduates requires planning of some sort. Slevin (1979), however, recognized the difference between the act of planning consciously and the practice of muddling through: "Planning is an integral and central function of every manager's task. If you don't plan, you become a crisis manager, responding to rather than driving the environment of your job" (p. 15). Nelson (1986) observed that "educational institutions and other nonprofit enterprises have not historically been strong in defining priorities and tacking into the winds of the future confident of their course" (p. 54). But in the business world, managers who are interested in driving the environment of their markets, defining their priorities, and tacking into the winds of the future have found success with the application of the strategic planning technique.

Strategic planning can become a major tool for educational administrators who wish to respond to the ever-increasing challenges besetting their programs. The need to plan strategically becomes crucial in a rapidly changing (and a less predictable) environment. For over a decade, educational administrators have been wrestling with increasing costs and less than adequate revenue. The resultant financial constraints are occurring at a time when public criticism of educational productivity is at an all-time high. In addition, other demands, such as health care, crime prevention and reduction, and deficit reduction are exerting increasing pressure on public spending. These demands have continued to compete for resources available for educational purposes.

Consequently, progressive and prudent educational administrators have sought and continue to search for planning and management techniques that will not only ensure the survival of their programs, but also enhance their visibility and effectiveness. Among the techniques widely acclaimed as relevant and helpful to educational administrators is strategic planning. As far back as 1986, McCune observed that "a few farsighted school

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superintendents experimented with strategic planning with varying levels of success" and that "an estimated 500 school districts currently engage in some form of strategic planning" (p. 31).

Purpose

The purposes of this short piece are to briefly describe what strategic planning is and how it can be useful to adult literacy program directors. This paper attempts to provide only an overview of this important planning technique, but hopefully, administrators will begin to appreciate how the adoption of strategic planning can help reduce some of the frustrations identified in Padak and Rasinski's (1994) "Family Literacy Programs: Getting Started," an OLRC publication.

Strategic Planning Defined

According to Bryson (1988), strategic planning is a "disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization (or other entity) is, what it does, and why it does it" (p. 5). Simerly (1987) adds that strategic planning "is a process that gives attention to (1) designing, (2) implementing, and (3) monitoring plans for improving organizational [or program] decision making" (p. 1). Strategic planning is not haphazard; rather, it is a disciplined effort with sequential steps of actions. If done correctly, strategic planning will result in measurable progress or growth for adult literacy programs.

Strategic Planning Models

There are different models of strategic planning, each with varying degrees of sophistication. Some models contain as few as five steps, but other more complex models may have more than 10 steps. The number of steps notwithstanding, writers generally agree about the core activities that must be addressed in strategic planning. The Figure provided below illustrates elements commonly found in most strategic planning models. The core activities include: (a) reaching initial agreement among all the planning committee members; (b) defining the program or organizational mandate and mission; (c) formulating program objectives; (d) conducting SWOT analysis, an acronym that stands for the analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats; (e) developing strategies and an action plan; (f) implementing the plan; and (g) monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of the implementation.

Each of the steps identified above has its own subprocess or substeps that need to be followed carefully. For example, the process of defining the institutional mission requires (1) the clarification of the mandates, i.e., what the program must accomplish; (2) the formulation of a vision, i.e., where the planners see the program will be at some future date (usually five to ten years); and (3) the articulation of the vision in terms of a mission, i.e., what the program will actually do.

The process of conducting SWOT analysis is also an elaborate one. SWOT analysis covers both the internal and external environment. Analyzing the internal environment involves auditing the program's resources and unique advantages. The result of this exercise will reveal both the strengths and the weaknesses of the program. Analyzing the external environment involves auditing the stakeholders' concerns and the political, economic, and social factors that may impact upon the program. If done correctly,

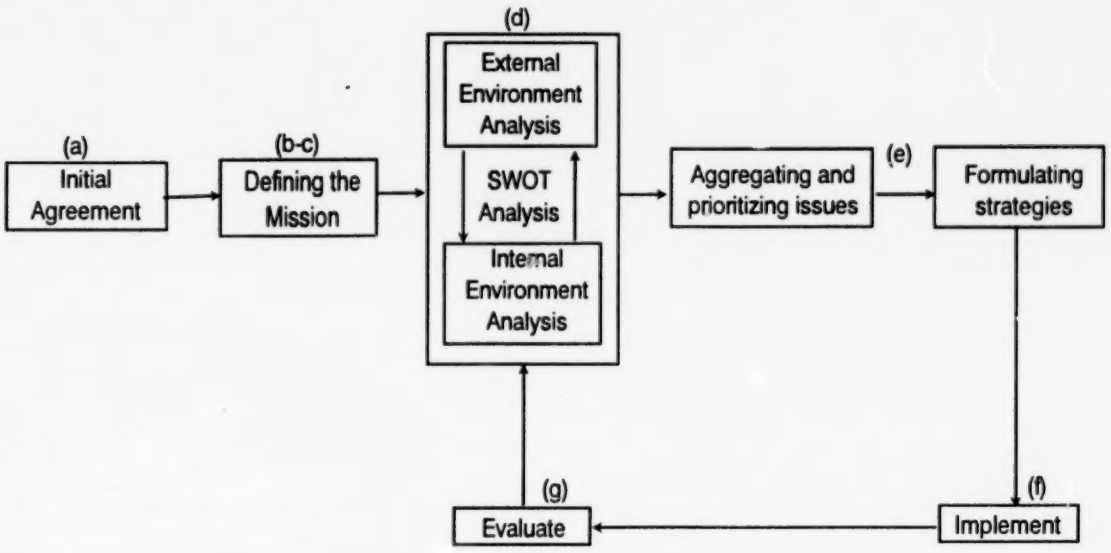

Figure: A Strategic Planning Model

the analysis of the external environment will reveal the opportunities open to the program as well as the threats to program success that administrators must consider.

The major task before strategic planners is to optimize the benefits presented by the opportunities in the environment, while at the same time reducing the threats or converting them into further opportunities. Program planners are able to convert threats into opportunities by improving their program's strengths and working on their weaknesses.

Specific Benefits of Strategic Planning to Program Directors

In responding to several "frustrations" expressed by adult literacy program directors, Padak and Rasinski (1994) advised that "one of the most important solutions was to develop as early as possible a clear vision of what the program was about, who it served, and in what ways" (p. 3). Developing a clear vision is wise advice for educational administrators, and strategic planning provides a technique for developing this vision and for linking the vision with all the other activities that will ensure its adoption and implementation.

Several other insightful suggestions are offered by these authors: collaborate and communicate with relevant agencies, develop realistic program goals, and develop an implementation strategy. Strategic planning, if done properly, provides a systematic way of implementing these suggestions. This planning technique provides the opportunity not only to identify relevant agencies, but also to identify and prioritize issues of concern to all stakeholders. By formulating a mission statement, a background is provided to ensure appropriate and realistic program goals. By considering budgetary details and other implementation matters, strategic planning ensures that the planning effort will result in concrete actions.

Conclusion

Strategic planning is an extensive planning process that ensures program survival and growth in a rapidly changing environment. It offers a rational basis for resource allocation and provides both rational and political approaches to issues aggregation and strategy formulation. Strategic planning provides many advantages to adult literacy program directors who wish to become proactive in their planning efforts and who wish to prolong the life of their adult literacy programs.

During the 1994 Leadership Academy, Dr. Michael presented a workshop on Strategic Planning. This publication is a culmination of that Academy.

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***Dr. Steve O. Michael** is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education Administration at Kent State University where he teaches strategic planning, higher education finance, institutional advancement and other business-related courses. Dr. Michael serves as a strategic planning consultant for several organizations.*

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